DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 695 HE 031 745

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TITLE	Creating More Public Space in Higher Education.
INSTITUTION	Council on Public Policy Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	9p.; Document contains light type.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Citizenship Education; *College Role; Democratic Values; Higher Education; Public Affairs Education; *Public Policy; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

This policy essay urges institutions of higher education to meet the needs of the public by creating more public space on their campuses. It briefly reviews the relationship between these institutions and the citizenry since colonial times, notes renewed efforts by Americans to band together for common public purposes, and reports a study which found that while undergraduates are disillusioned with politics, they recognize their need for civic education. Colleges and universities are encouraged to increase opportunities for faculty and student contact with a democratic public by funding more occasions, events, programs, and places where faculty and students can interact with citizens active in politics and with those engaged in building communities. The paper notes that more than 20 institutions have established public policy institutes or centers to lead forums on the critical issues facing American communities and that there is increased emphasis on a more public kind of scholarship and on educating students to become "civic professionals." The paper urges institutions to adopt a civic network-building strategy and establish institutes whose mission is intertwined with the self-interests of the college or university and to which faculty and staff are committed. (DB)

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Essay by David Mathews

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Creating More Public Space in Higher Education

by David Mathews

The Council on Public Policy Education was founded in 1977 to serve as a convener for foundations, educational institutions, and civic groups who wish to undertake cooperative projects that build a stronger public and to stimulate collaborative research efforts. CPPE partnerships are with organizations and institutions located throughout the world.

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Higher education's relationship with the public today is shaped by its principal functions: research, instruction, and service. Institutions add to the store of human knowledge through research. For some academics, such as social scientists, the public realm is a source of that knowledge. Colleges and universities then transmit their knowledge to students through instruction and make it available outside of academe through technical assistance and expertise provided to farmers, physicians, business executives, and a host of other professionals. The public is also served by critiques from thoughtful, often contrary-minded scholars.

Certainly the country will benefit if higher education continues to demonstrate excellence in research, instruction, and service. Yet, these three roles may not exhaust the possibilities for the work of colleges and universities in a democracy. Or, better said, there may be other meanings for research, instruction, and service that would allow academe to respond more effectively to the challenges now confronting public life in America. In order to explore these new roles, academic institutions will have to reposition themselves in public life, in part by creating more public space on their campuses, more places for people to do the work a democratic citizenry must do.

In trying to respond to the challenges of their day, institutions of higher learning have understood the public and positioned themselves in public life differently at different times. Colonial colleges saw their mission as bringing civilization to a wilderness; they stamped public life with piety and classical culture. Institutions founded in the aftermath of the American Revolution were intent on educating leaders for a new republic. Following the Civil War, "practical" education became a powerful imperative that led to the creation of new land-grant institutions known as "people's colleges." Later, we imported a fascination with positivism and scientific research from Europe, which we institutionalized in research universities, charging them with the responsibility for educating a new class of "professionals" to serve the "true" public interest and protect society from the overly emotional, often uninformed pressures of the populace. After World War II, a concern that many Americans still did not have access to a higher education — that our society was undereducated — prompted the proliferation of colleges deeply embedded in our communities. And, since mid-century, the role of our academic institutions has been shaped by the demands that the Cold War made on society, as Bill Richardson, president of the Kellogg Foundation, has pointed out.

The Challenges of Public Life

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, America faces different challenges. In the post-Cold War world, the threat of nuclear annihilation is not as pressing, while threats to family and community have become far more serious. Our civil society is less than civil on occasion and shows signs of deep divisions separating Americans from one another. As a nation, we are voting less and delegitimizing our institutions more. Programs have proliferated but problems remain, like the bugs that have become resistant to our laboratories' most powerful insecticides. Our pathologies mock expert solutions with implacable human realities.

America's ability to respond to these new challenges is undermined by a concept of democracy that some scholars describe as "weak." Why else, they imply, would we turn once-sovereign citizens into insatiable consumers and diminish the sense of civic responsibility that is a corollary of sovereignty? Our idea of service, while admirably promoting individual altruism, sometimes undervalues the necessity for collective political action. And, our principal institutions, along with the professionals who serve them, can be so estranged from the public that they cannot lead effectively. Although properly accountable, some public servants hold a concept of the public that is too abstract to account for much of what really goes on in public life.

It is particularly easy to miss what citizens are doing beyond volunteering — what they are doing to act on the causes of problems that volunteers try to alleviate. It doesn't take many trips to a soup kitchen to realize that soup isn't the answer. Convinced that our most serious problems are too deeply embedded in the social and moral fabric of society to be solved by governments alone, many Americans believe they

must band together and act as a public in order to deal with the threats to their common life. They see themselves, not as clients of the government or customers of public institutions, but as political actors who must be busy in public work.

These Americans are creating space — public space — where they can do their work. That work begins in making decisions about how to act, proceeds to the implementation of these decisions in a more complementary, horizontally (rather than vertically) organized form of civic action, and both ends and begins again in a form of evaluation that promotes learning from experience rather than "proving" success. And, while no one is sure how many of these citizens there are, the future of the country surely depends on more citizens finding space to do their work — work that casts doubt on the conventional wisdom best expressed by Walter Lippmann in his obituary for a supposedly "phantom" public incapable of governing itself.

At the same time, a new literature on public life or civil society has emerged in Europe and moved to America. It argues that we need a "stronger" democracy in which citizens join in public work and deliberate over conflicting moral claims about how to act in their collective interest. See the writings of Benjamin Barber, Harry Boyte, James Fishkin, Amy Gutmann, and Dennis Thompson, among others. Also, critics like John McKnight of Northwestern University are challenging the prevailing assumption that the public is a body of patients and customers defined more by their needs than their capabilities.

Higher Education and the Public

What has been happening to our institutions of higher learning while the country struggles to reinvigorate its democratic civil society? All have fallen in measures of public confidence. Perhaps surprisingly, it isn't just governments that have lost their electorates, other institutions, like the public schools, have also lost much of their public. People no longer say these are <u>our</u> institutions. And, although still seen as important in an age when a college education is a key to a good income, institutions of higher education end the twentieth century in a very different position from the one they occupied when it began. Insistent boards and legislatures want more for their money at a time when colleges and universities have lost much of the public confidence they once enjoyed.

Reports on campus life also suggest that many campuses are plagued internally with the same breakdown in the civil order that threatens society at large. Although most charters for colleges and universities mandate preparation for public life, students don't seem to be forming the kind of attitudes or acquiring the skills needed to be public leaders. And it isn't because students don't care about the major issues or their fellow citizens.

Many undergraduates doubt that today's politics addresses the problems they care about. And, according to a Kettering Foundation study, they are particularly put off by the tone of what they hear — by the extremes and negative tenor of what appears to be a grossly adversarial political system, with no regard for fair play.[1] Their perceptions come from more than watching television; they are shaped by experiences on campuses. The debates appall them. One complained, "People are very opinionated in my classes. There is no moderation at all and [the discussion] gets totally out of bounds," deciding as another graduate did, "There are no solutions discussed; it is all rhetoric."

Participants in the foundation's study knew what was missing from the politics they criticized. They didn't see a diversity of perspectives, a habit of listening, and a careful weighing of trade-offs. They could even identify what they would need in order to practice a different kind of politics — the discipline to keep an open mind, the willingness to stand in someone else's shoes, the capacity to change, and the ability to make decisions with others. There was no indication that any of the students in the study had taken courses on the theory of deliberative democracy. Yet, they could describe the essential characteristics of a deliberative politics in which people talk and think together in ways that enable them to act together.

Although these undergraduates first questioned whether their institutions could do much to help

them create a better form of politics, on reflection they wondered why their schools didn't try to do more. As one said, "The college should challenge us directly . . . [it] should sharpen our skills to be good citizens. . . ." Higher education does not deny its responsibility for teaching about politics. What students say, however, suggests that they are learning only one kind of politics — politics as usual. Unfortunately, as things stand now, many campuses seem to reinforce, perhaps unwittingly, society's worst attitudes about the political system.

Students' actual civic education is education for political life where citizens play a limited role as taxpayers and, occasionally, as voters. "Politics" is largely what politicians and governments do. So undergraduates — and maybe graduate students as well — don't think politics is for them. They don't entertain the possibility that it is an integral dimension of everyone's life. Their civic education gives them neither the language nor the concepts to explore "the political."

Adding More Public Space

This analysis suggests that colleges and universities would benefit, certainly their students would, if they had more ways of experiencing other kinds of politics or other meanings of "the political." In order for that to happen, institutions would have to have other ways of positioning themselves in public life, other ways to engage the public. There would need to be more public space on our campuses.

Fundamental institutional change, whatever the institution, often requires bringing in (not forcing in) outside experiences and perspectives. Therefore, it is likely that academic institutions will be more effective in responding to the challenges of public life if they increase their contact with a democratic public — with those citizens who are creating a place for themselves in politics other than just as voters or taxpayers, with those who are political actors serving the larger public interest, with those who are building rather than escaping from communities. For that to happen, there have to be more occasions, events, programs, places, or "public space" where faculty and students can find these citizens at work. For students, in particular, there is no better way to learn the deliberative politics they yearn for than from the citizens who practice it. And, for citizens, there should be more places on campus where they can carry out some of their public work.

Happily, faculty and staff in some colleges and universities have made room for a deliberative public. More than 20 institutions — from the University of California at Davis to Gulf Coast Community College to Purdue University — have already established Public Policy Institutes or centers to promote a stronger democracy. They are preparing citizens to lead forums on the critical issues facing every community in the country — drug abuse, welfare, affirmative action, economic development. These forums are often called National Issues Forums (NIF), after issue books by that name.

Who attends these institutes? Participants come from civic organizations and neighborhood associations, leadership and literacy programs, churches and synagogues. They are members of groups that see economic development as community building; they are journalists concerned with public life; they are officeholders looking for a better way to relate to an estranged citizenry. They are every kind of American. The institutes in this country are also linked to similar institutes in 16 other countries, including Russia, Lebanon, South Africa, Colombia, Argentina, and Guatemala. They are rich in opportunities to learn how to develop stronger democracies.

New institutes or centers that are creating more public space in their institution can be found in Alabama sponsored by a consortium of Auburn University, Stillman College, Shelton State Community College, and The University of Alabama. They can be found at the University of California, Davis, University of Delaware, College of DuPage, Illinois, Gulf Coast Community College, Florida, Hofstra University, New York, Kent State University, Ohio, University of Kentucky, Michigan State University, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, University of Oklahoma, University of Pennsylvania, Purdue University, Indiana, University of South Carolina, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Wayne State College, Nebraska, and in the Pacific Northwest at Portland Community College, Oregon. Other institutions besides universities also hold institutes. They are the West Virginia Humanities Council/University of Charleston, the Topeka Association of Neighborhoods, Kansas, and the National Council for the Social Studies, Washington, D.C.

Public Meanings for Research, Instruction, and Service

As colleges and universities [illegible]tion themselves in public life, their work can take on more of a public character. They can explore the public meaning of research, instruction, and service.

The potential for a more public kind of research is already enhanced by profound changes in the intellectual underpinnings of academe. Perhaps as a consequence of natural scientists breaching the narrow confines of "objective" science, the technical rationality that has been so much in vogue may have to share top billing with ways of knowing that grow out of interrogating shared human experience. To use our experiences in deciding how we should act calls for the exercise of moral reasoning, which Aristotle, among others, has written about. This way of thinking together is similar to what Jürgen Habermas calls "communicative reasoning" and is close to the practical reasoning of citizens.

Partly as a response to this epistemological shift, and partly out of a desire to live more public lives, a small group of faculty now questions the standard definition of scholarship. These academics are asking: Can a more public kind of scholarship grow out of producing practical wisdom, not for but with citizens? Is there a "public" knowledge that consists of those things people can comprehend only when they are together but never alone? If so, then being "public" scholars will require these faculty members to position themselves differently in public life. They will have to do more than dispense expert knowledge; they will have to become part of the intense human exchanges that are characteristic of practical reasoning and that create publicly informed knowledge.

New institutes or centers can promote their own form of public scholarship by undertaking the sort of research that produces the knowledge a public needs in deciding how to act. Institutes already teaching public deliberation have two opportunities to do that. They can begin to learn from what people are learning from their curriculum. Unlike the usual teacher evaluation where the focus is on the instructor's performance, this research should concentrate on how people acquire and master the practices of democratic citizenship. Institutions can also study the effects deliberation has on the formation of public opinion by staying in touch with participants who go on to conduct public policy forums.

Many of the people who come to the institutes want to learn deliberation in order to make sound choices about how to act on community problems. There are a number of subjects for research in tracing what happens both before and after forums. Existing and new institutes might focus on deepening the country's understanding of all that is involved in revitalizing our communities and strengthening civil society. An expanded curriculum, supported by research, might address such issues as how people become involved, accept responsibility, make choices, act together, and learn from the results of their action. Such a curriculum might be particularly appealing to leadership organizations, especially those that want to develop new concepts of leadership focused on civil society building and what Ronald Heifetz at Harvard University calls "marshaling the resources for change."[1]

Enlarging the kind of research done in colleges and universities in this way invariably leads to questions about the kind of instruction that is appropriate for political education or education for public life. In the Winter 1993 issue of the *Kettering Review*, Professor Alejandro Sanz de Santamaria gave a detailed account of the way public scholarship affects instruction. His students learn how they can participate in the social construction of knowledge rather than just dispense expert knowledge.

While the twentieth century's mandate has been to prepare scientifically trained professionals, we may need to begin educating students to become what Thomas Bender of New York University calls "civic professionals" — those who understand that they need the public and its knowledge in order to do their work. Those who educate civic professionals will have to teach them to integrate their scientific learning into the public's practical reasoning. And that will require substantial changes in our classrooms, changes so fundamental that even our newest educational technologies cannot bring them about.

Institutes already teaching deliberative politics to community leaders have an opportunity to begin making these changes by bringing undergraduates into their programs and by creating courses that allow

students to both experience and reflect on alternatives to politics as usual. What happens in those courses would also be an interesting topic for participant research.

The relationship of the policy institutes with the public is different and so is the meaning of the service they provide. Some institutes have citizens' committees from forums that join them in designing the curriculum and providing the instruction. While this kind of partnership is not unheard of, it is such a distinguishing characteristic of the institutes that it could be developed into a new strategy for relating to and serving the public. *The central idea is to locate colleges and universities in the dense network of civic associations found to be critical to a strong civil society. The institutes serve as network builders.*

Though not antithetical, that is a somewhat different strategy from the ones institutions now use to relate to the public. Colleges and universities have to marshal public support and they also have to maintain good relationships with the various clienteles they serve, which are usually professional groups in law, medicine, business, and so on. A civic network-building strategy would supplement what is now done in the name of serving the public.

A Plan of Action

Institutes interested in taking on new roles need time to develop. And they need company. New institutes should be created that will reach different segments of our society and help with special problems such as the "disconnect" separating the public from nearly all of the principal institutions and their professional staff. Journalists, public administrators, and school officials all need opportunities to experience the public as something other than readers, viewers, clients, customers, and special interest groups. An excellent example of what can be done by focusing on the disconnect, can be found at the new institute created by the Center for School Study Councils at the University of Pennsylvania, which is helping to reconnect the public and the public schools.

Obviously, new institutes or centers will be difficult to initiate and sustain in today's climate, where the emphasis is on doing more with less. So, they must have staying power to be effective. Prospects for their long-term viability can be improved by locating their mission in the self-interests of the college or university. Hammering out goals for institutes that connect directly with those of the parent institution is protection against their becoming academic orphans. Of course, for any new venture to succeed, there must be a core of faculty members committed to teaching and doing the research. This group might find allies in campus leadership and honors programs. Also, in order for the new academic structures to flourish, they need to have a public constituency providing outside support. A citizens' board with heavy alumni representation might be helpful. So might close working relationships with news organizations, government agencies, businesses, and civic associations. Most of all, the college or university establishing an institute to create more public space must make a firm commitment of faculty and staff time.

1 This paragraph and other sections of the paper are adapted from an essay by David Mathews, "Character for What? Higher Education and Public Life," published by the *Educational Record*, Spring/Fall 1995.

2 The Harwood Group, *College Students Talk Politics*. Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 1993.

3 Ronald Heifetz, Leadership without Easy Answers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994.

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